THE TROUBLE WITH RELIGION...

Scripture
Jeremiah 31:31-34
John 2:13-22

Zeal for your house will consume me."
-John 2:17 (NSRV)

There is a little story about a lighthouse that has much meaning for everyone who either earns a living working for the church or spends a lot of time working in the church as a volunteer. I do not recall when I first heard it, but I think about it often. In fact, it torments me - like an albatross around my neck.

The story is about a community of people who lived on the sea coast, near a particularly dangerous outcropping of rock. Many ships accidentally sailed into the rocks. Many sailors drowned. And so the people of the community decided to build a lighthouse. And when they had completed the task, they further decided to form an organization to maintain the lighthouse, to make sure the light was shining every night and that there was someone there. In addition they decided to organize a brigade to go to the rescue of the sailors in case a ship came aground on the rocks in spite of their lighthouse. The idea was simple enough. When a ship hit the rocks, the person in the lighthouse would ring the bell and the volunteer brigade would quickly launch the boat and rescue the sailors. And it worked beautifully.

But then the lighthouse began to deteriorate a little bit and so the people organized a committee to repair it. And the boat brigade decided it needed a better rescue boat. And so the people organized a committee to raise the money to buy a better boat. And you couldn't always hear the bell on a windy night, so they got up another committee and they took bids on a phone system. And then someone suggested that the lighthouse would look much nicer if some flowers were planted around its base. And the people who planted the flowers had such a good time together they decided to come down to the lighthouse every Tuesday night to have a cup of coffee and chat a little bit and pretty soon they elected officers and formed committees. On and on it went and it became a pretty complex lighthouse. And one day when it was time to recruit a new brigade to take the rescue boat out into the ocean, the officers of the Lighthouse Corporation (for it was now a chartered not-for-profit) discovered that everybody was too busy maintaining the lighthouse and so they decided to cut back the rescue service one night per week.

Well, you get the idea. You can amplify that little story and with a little imagination turn it into an allegory which will fit any organization. Because there is, I believe, built into the universe a principle which says that an idea which inspires an institution is in constant and grave danger from that institution. Organizational development people know it. Management consultants are retained by

corporations, large and small, to help them enhance efficiency, and the first thing the consultant asks is, "What is the purpose of this institution? Define it. Don't do anything else until you write your mission statement." It seems like every organization with which I have anything to do is writing its mission statement! It might seem odd at first. After all, doesn't a college, a hospital, a business, a service organization know what it's about? The answer is probably not - unless it has some way of reminding itself regularly. If it doesn't, the universal principles will operate and it will expend more and more of its energy and resources on activities different from and sometimes in conflict with its original inspiration and intent. Thomas Jefferson thought nations ought to have an intentional revolution every several generations to renew their commitment to founding principles.

Religion is certainly not immune. In fact, there is a sense in which the Bible is the story of an idea in constant conflict with the institutions it inspires. The story begins with love and keeps ending up with laws. It starts with an act of grace and keeps producing rules and rituals and taboos. God creates. God chooses a people. God leads them out of slavery, nurtures them like a mother nursing her child, feeds them, tends to them. The people respond to God's incredible mercy and love with rituals intended to help them express gratitude and with laws and customs. Religion begins as a way to say "thank you" for God's boundless love.

But the Bible is, second, the story of people forgetting that and making more laws and rituals and customs as a way to earn God's love rather than respond to it. Slowly, relentlessly, religion changes from a way a person can live out gratitude to God and becomes the means by which people think they can persuade God to love them. Occasionally someone stands up in the Bible and objects to this Organizational Dynamic. Hosea, for instance: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings." In their objecting, these individuals, known as prophets, sometimes sound like enemies of religion. Amos, for instance: "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. But let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an everflowing stream." God, according to the prophets of Israel, doesn't care much about the formalities of religion when religion becomes an end in itself. What God wants is life lived in response to divine love; that is life lived in compassion and justice.

The Bible is, in one sense, the story of the tension between Gospel and religion, that is between the Good News of God's love and the institutions and structures it spawns. And nowhere is that tension as eloquently described as in the New Testament lesson this morning.

It is not a soothing story. Jesus traveled to Jerusalem and went to the Temple, the center of religion. Historians have been able to piece together what he saw there.

Every adult male was required to pay an annual Temple tax of half a shekel, the equivalent of two days wages. When a man came to the Temple to pay his tax he entered through a series of courtyards. The first was the Court of the Gentiles, open to all people. It was here that he paid the tax at one of the booths constructed for that purpose. However, the coin

he had in his hand was probably a Roman denarii, or a Greek drachma, both of which bore the likeness of an emperor, a graven image that is, and so there were other booths at which he could change his money into shekels, for a small service charge.

Now a man who traveled to Jerusalem to pay his tax would probably also wish to visit the Temple and to worship there, which meant making a sacrifice. If he brought along a lamb, or a pair of pigeons for that purpose, they had to be inspected to assure they were without blemish. There were booths for that. If he had brought none, he could move on to the next booth and purchase a pre-inspected sacrificial animal: lambs and oxen for the wealthy; pigeons for the poor.

It must have looked and sounded like a state fair on a busy afternoon. Someone quipped that the outer court of the Temple was a kind of "walk-in convenience store" - a religious Walgreens on Saturday night.

As usual the people who got hurt by the system were the poor, the ones who couldn't afford a lamb to eat let alone slaughter sacrificially. The system also sustained the institution. It was a stewardship chairperson's dream. The Temple was fabulously wealthy, so wealthy in fact that the Roman officials were always turning to the High Priest to finance a pet public works project.

But the worst of it was that this whole exploitive commercial enterprise bazaar and the system it supported was what religion had become.

Sometimes faith picks a fight. Sometimes love gets angry. Jesus made a whip, and he upset the tables of the currency exchange, sending the coins flying, and physically ejected the salesmen and their livestock. It must have been a moment. And I've always enjoyed the thought that when his friends remembered him later, one of the times they recalled and still laughed about was that unforgettable day in the Temple.

But at the time, John reports, the disciples for some reason, recalled the words of an obscure Psalm:

"Zeal for your house will consume me."

It's exactly what happened. Religious people, acting in the name of religion, motivated by a sincere desire to preserve and protect their religion, managed to persuade the Romans to execute him.

And so the story makes me nervous. It reminds me that there is a fine line between responsible participation in the life of an institution, providing for its perpetuation and making the institution an end in itself.

It is a reminder that to love the church, this church or any church, is to know the tension generated by that love. There is a built-in conflict between the Gospel of Christ and the institutions it inspires. It is not necessarily destructive conflict. In fact, the conflict is what keeps the church faithful. It is when we become smug, too content with who we are, too sure of our own righteousness, too obsessed with our own preservation, that we endanger the church.

One of the unforgettable moments at the Canberra Assembly of the World Council of Churches was the return of the Chinese Church to full membership. When the World Council was born after World War II, the Chinese Churches were charter members. Those churches were extensions of American and European Missionary Boards. After the Communist Revolution the churches were severely curtailed, and after the Cultural Revolution, absolutely banished. The world assumed that the Christian faith had died because the churches were put out of business. What happened, of course, was that Christianity thrived, and found new forms, secret house churches for instance. And so when the church emerged recently it was without the old American and European denominational connections. It is today vigorous, growing rapidly, five million strong, organizing new churches at the rate of three every two days.

Sometimes faith deepens and thrives when it is unencumbered by its institutional paraphernalia.

Joan Chittister

British novelist, Barbara Pym, after a long and dull sermon, wrote in her diary that she wished she had the courage to give up church for Lent. [Worshipping Little Gods, David Bartlett, The Christian Century, 2/20/91]

She couldn't have meant it literally! But it is a whimsical expression of a very real dynamic, which we have all experienced, namely the occasional conflict between the paraphernalia of religion, the fuss generated by "organized religion" - which someone noted is an oxymoron if there ever was one - and the unqualified, unconditional goodness of Christianity.

Paul Tillich probed the topic brilliantly. One time he said that one of the burdens Jesus promised to lift from us is the burden of religion.

Philosophers have always known that there is a very basic anxiety in the human heart. Psychology confirms it - that church has to do with our awareness of our mortality. Fear and anxiety and restlessness are part of the human condition. Religion, Professor Tillich taught, is the human attempt to resolve it.

But, Jesus Christ is God's resolution of our anxiety.

In the long story of the human race religion is the search for some Good News.

Jesus Christ is Good News.

In the history of humankind religion is an attempt to locate and identify a God.

Jesus Christ is God locating and identifying and loving us.

So as we think today about the church and our lives in relationship to whatever religion we have, please do so in the context of this disturbing incident. And may what happened that day happen to you.

May the Lord Christ walk into the sanctuary of your heart and upset the tables and make a holy mess...

May he force the issue for you of how habit and custom and the dead weight of routine have perhaps replaced your best hopes and noblest expectations... in your relationships, for instance,

- or your personal goals and professional aspirations,

- or the general tenor and tempo of your life which perhaps sometimes feels like a dry repetition of the same story, over and over.

May the Lord Christ confront you this morning and that in you, in his holy and sometimes impatient love, his unconditional gift of salvation, and his demand that you stand up and receive it, give him your love, your passion, your laughter, tears, hopes and dreams.

May the Lord Christ upset the tables of whatever religious rituals have become empty and meaningless for you and command you to live honestly in his name.

And then there will be a transformation. Instead of a duty, your religion will become a celebration. Instead of obligation, your religion will become an affirmation of life. Instead of empty ritual, religion will become a way of saying something no words can express... our gratitude to God for the unspeakable gift of love revealed in Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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Holy God, your appearance in our life is not always comfortable. Disturb us. Interrupt the routine of our religion. Startle us with your goodness and your love and give us courage to respond with all we have and all we are... through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.